The Ethical Component: Thoughts for Parashat Yitro

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Yitro

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes served as Minister of Congregation Shearith Israel from 1877 through 1920. He continued to be associated with the Congregation as Minister Emeritus until his death in 1937. During the course of these 60 years, Dr. Mendes established himself as a remarkable communal leader, scholar, and author.

Born in Birmingham, England, he grew up in a family well-known for its history of producing religious leaders. His father Abraham was Minister of the Jewish congregation in Birmingham. H. P. Mendes received his early religious education and inspiration from his parents and as a young man served as Hazan and Minister of the Sephardic congregation in Manchester. While in New York, he studied and graduated from the medical school of New York University. In 1890, he was married to Rosalie Rebecca Piza.

Dr. Mendes was one of the leading Orthodox rabbis in the United States. He was a founder and the first president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (1898). He was also one of the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary (1887), which he and his collaborators intended to be an institution that would produce English-speaking Orthodox rabbis.

A prolific author, Dr. Mendes wrote essays and editorials, children's stories, textbooks, sermons, prayers, dramatic works, poetry, and commentaries. His writings were imbued with the love of the Bible.

The religious vision of Dr. Mendes is reflected in the titles of his main books: Jewish History Ethically Presented (1895), The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented (1895), and Jewish Life Ethically Presented (1917). In 1934, he prepared a little volume of prayers and meditations for home use "to promote and facilitate the habit of prayer."

Dr. Mendes' religious outlook was deeply steeped in the Hebrew Bible. The verses of Scripture served as the basis of an ethical and compassionate way of life. In The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented, he demonstrated his method of thought. He began each section with a citation from the Bible, and then provided the traditional lessons that were derived from the text. He then added his own elaboration of moral lessons that could be rooted in the biblical text. And then he offered a series of biblical quotations to close each section.

For example, in dealing with the third of the Ten Commandments (Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain), Dr. Mendes provided the traditional explanations of this commandment. It is forbidden to use God's name in a disrespectful way, for a false oath, or for any wrong purpose. Likewise, this commandment is violated whenever one says prayers without concentration and reverent devotion. Dr. Mendes added the ethical component: "We take His name in vain, or to no purpose, if we speak of God being good, just, merciful, etc., without trying ourselves to be good, just, merciful, etc." We must be loving, merciful and forgiving, in emulation of God's ways."

Dr. Mendes then offered a number of extensions to this commandment:

We are children of God. We are called by His name. When we do wrong, we disgrace or profane His name. Hence a disgraceful act is called Chilul Hashem, a profanation of the Name. And just as all the members of a family feel any disgrace that any one of them incurs, so when any Hebrew does wrong, the disgrace is felt by all Jews. We are known as the people of God. We assume His

name in vain unless we obey His Laws….We take or assume His name in vain when we call ourselves by His name and say we are His children or His people, while for our convenience or ease we neglect religious duties which He has commanded us. (The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented, revised edition, 1912, pp. 59–60)

In elaborating on the commandment to honor one's parents, Dr. Mendes stated:

To honor parents, ministers of religion, the aged, the learned, our teachers and authorities is a sign of the highest type of true manliness and of true womanliness. Respect for parents is essential to the welfare of society…..Anarchy or the absence of respect for authority, always brings ruin. Respect for all the authorities is insisted upon in the Bible. (p. 64)

In discussing the commandment prohibiting murder, Dr. Mendes noted that "we may not kill a man's good name or reputation, nor attack his honor. We do so when we act as a tale-bearer or slanderer." He goes on to say that "we may not kill a man's business….Respect for human life carries with it respect for anyone's livelihood. We may not make it hard for others to live by reason of our own greed" (pp. 65–66).

Dr. Mendes taught that the ethical component is integral to the commandments. Judaism is not only blessed with a system of laws, but is inspirited with a code of ethics.